

A Luminous Portrait of New York

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New York is not an easy city. It may be interesting for a visit but it's hard to live there. It's dirty, and often hostile. I guess I really don't like the city, which may pose a problem, now that Ana has kindly invited me to write a text about our meetings there. She wants me to portray her with Manhattan as the background, but I feel slightly uncomfortable. I cannot be entirely objective. I've mentioned this feeling to her in order to avoid any misunderstanding, but my complaints didn't faze her. I suspect she likes New York. Maybe she is brave. Or bold. Or maybe she just likes the city so much, she fears mythologizing it, and that's why she's asked me to write this. Now that I think about it, I feel she's not afraid of a final portrait with lights and shadows. And curiously, it is this game of luminous contrasts that has shaped our encounters in the city.

We may have met three or four times in Manhattan, whenever my crazy schedule allowed me to leave Philadelphia. In those brief meetings we talked about the difficulties of living in the city (mainly, I) and her sculptural projects (mostly, she). Those were dialogues in parallel, and an amusing example of the divergent approach we have when looking at things.

But we argued with elegance. Ana loves to observe, while I enjoy shaping stories. So, while I would nudge her towards a Francis Alÿs' show at the

MoMA, or steer her to a conference of independent publishers at Printed Matter, she would respond in kind by pointing me towards the half-hidden sculptures in the corners of the city. She made me see with new eyes, the colored glass fragments inside a tunnel at the High Line (the garden bridge rising over Chelsea), and when we went down to street level, she pushed me around a camper trailer, cut into pieces and outspread in a commercial gallery on the 26th Street. With patience, she taught me to notice the delicacy of the light embedded in the urban fabric.

I cannot separate our meetings from those contrasts. I remember, as in a snapshot, a tavern in the West Village, her scarf, mauve against the smoky wood bench. Ana was talking about one of her most recent sculptures, an artwork of light that she had just installed in a gallery. The piece consisted of yellow membranes attached to the windows along a gallery wall. The membranes remained transparent, or became opaque, depending on where they were lit from. With external light (daylight) you could see the street from the gallery. At night (without external lighting), the membranes closed the view. She told me, "This piece is not activated by light, but by the contrast of light." Meanwhile, on the table was placed a cold glass of white wine, beside the soft, pulpy bodies of oysters. Her gestures made me see, almost feel, the darkness of the wood behind the translucence of the crystal glass.

The truth is that Ana's sculpture is close to American sculpture. She has attended two of the best sculpture programs in the United States and she knows well the American contemporary art scene. That's why the geometry of

her work is not a simple geometry. That might seem so, at first glance, but in fact her artworks are full of stories. She connects them to the streets or to her own biography, in ways that challenge American refined formalism.

This is a dangerous word, 'formalism,' because of the critical connotations associated with it. But I believe most of the best American sculptures in the last ten years are related to this unusual kind of formalism, something a little filthy, where everyday issues merge with the purity of geometry—like the spilling of a cup of coffee on a large painted cube. And Ana's sculpture, without being American, shares some of that sensibility. She enjoys looking for slow, imperceptible geometries. Those geometries are delicate and are shaped in part by a careful selection of materials. Each material, beyond its beauty, opens the piece to alternative and more melancholic reflections.

Inside the cushioned duskiess of the wooden tavern, on that street obscured by huge blocks of cement, that precise articulation on sculptural ideas of light, and what's behind the light, intrigued me.

Before her visit to New York, Ana didn't care too much about this sort of talk. She has always preferred to speak through the sculptures. I think her openness to the word is the result of these months in the city, and the material conditions of her stay. The necessity of working at the dining room table transformed her daily practice. Forced to forego the freedoms afforded by the studio, her new workspace was the quiet coffee shop, where instead of testing materials, she had to focus on the most intangible part of the

sculptural process: as she told me, she started her daily work routine by reading the cultural section of several newspapers, and it was only after this little ritual that she could throw herself into drawing or developing projects.

So, it comes as no surprise that her best sculpture is a New York piece that she has not built yet. She told me that she has designed a portable room. Perhaps it was her lack of space in New York-to work in or to store materials-that she began envisioning a small room, a room with wooden walls, each unit as big as USPS dimension specifications allowed. She thought to send these walls, without any protection, to the exhibition place. So, a few bare walls, sealed and addressed, would be traveling through three or four states. The walls would arrive scuffed, marked by the traces of the journey. Once in the gallery, she would assemble them, perhaps install a little detail (a chair, a lamp) to transform the naked room into a more habitable space. Her idea was to roam the piece through various places, assembling and disassembling the walls, in order to make the history more and more dense.

But Ana has chosen to build another dream for this exhibition. Another habitable piece. A brick wall with strange, uneven colors produced by its own genesis: the bricks are made of pressed and compacted materials. Fabric, paper and other small objects, collected and gathered over a lifetime. Each unit compresses memories, then used to build something more, something uniquely else. A wall, the beginning of a room, maybe eventually a house.

Ana's work makes me think. Ultimately, what she and I were discussing was

not the presence or absence of stories but stories of a different order. Ana's stories talk about a slow attention, a kind of noticing that is almost vegetal- what a tree might see if it had eyes: the path of light on the floor, the thickness of a shadow, and the traces of those intimate moments. I like these stories that can regenerate the alienation of a melancholic office with a blue drop of light. So, yes, I guess I can say that Ana, with those walks through New York, has taught me to look at things in a different way.

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Translated from the original Spanish version by Angela Sánchez de Vera.